



The Influencers

They are the forces behind the world's most creative makeup, the exercise craze that's reshaping the trendiest movers and shakers, and every young celebrity's fashion obsession. These are today's most innovative stylemakers.

MODELS, FROM LEFT: NAIROBY, ISMINI, GIFT, MAYE MUSK, ADRIANA M., AND STELLA MAXWELL

The Ringleader: M.A.C.

How a weird indie startup took over the world of makeup.

By Danielle Pergament

Imagine you're at a dinner party. And not just any dinner party. You're at a dinner party seated next to Catherine Deneuve, who, by the way, is ignoring you and talking to Raquel Welch. To your right is Nicki Minaj, telling off-color jokes with RuPaul. Just as the salad is served, the door bursts open and Lady Gaga blows in, Elton John and Liza Minnelli right behind her. You look in the corner and see...wait. Is that? Yes, there's Wonder Woman, discreetly picking a piece of spinach out of her teeth, while Barbie giggles next to her. And just when things can't get any weirder, you look across the table and lock eyes with Hello Kitty. She tilts her cartoon head and gives you a knowing look—one that says, Yep, welcome to M.A.C.

This is what it's like inside the world of M.A.C. Cosmetics, a place where all personalities—the stars and the freaks, the icons and the outcasts—are not only welcome, they are revered (which is why each of these dinner guests has had his or her own line with M.A.C.). You may not have noticed, but M.A.C. has quietly taken over the planet. Only the takeover hasn't been that quiet. The company sells more lipstick (and blush, eye shadow, eyeliner, lip gloss, lip liner, and makeup brushes) than any other nondrugstore brand, according to the NPD Group.

You can buy M.A.C. products in more than 70 countries. There are over 12,000 makeup artists around the world who work for M.A.C. And if you have ever seen a picture of a model walking down the runway at a fashion show, there is a good chance she is wearing at least one form of M.A.C. makeup. To call the brand formidable is like calling Stephen Hawking smart.

"The whole point of M.A.C. is to create an environment where people

From left: Top and skirt by J. Mendel. Jacket by Helmut. Top by Pierre Balmain. Jeans by Hudson. Top by Peter Som. Jeans by Hudson. Dress by Peter Pilotto. Top by Helmut Lang. Top by Victoria Beckham Denim. Jeans by Diesel Black Gold. Makeup colors, from left: Cremesheen lipstick in On Hold; Satin lipstick in Retro; Powder Blush in Harmony and Satin lipstick in Faux; Matte lipstick in Ruby Woo; and eye shadow in Carbon and Satin lipstick in Faux, all by M.A.C. Makeup: Yasuo Yoshikawa. Manicure: Gina Viviano of Mizu Salon. M.A.C. store makeup artists: Jennifer Chen and Regenna Carson. These pages: Hair, Italo Gregorio. Fashion editor: Siobhan Bonnouvrier. Details, see Shopping Guide.

THE INFLUENCERS

can write their own story," says Gordon Espinet, the head makeup artist for the company. "I grew up a complete outcast [in Trinidad], where I didn't look and behave like everyone else. I was an introvert, the kid who wanted to sit in a dark corner and draw pictures of eyes, not play soccer. When I came to M.A.C. over 20 years ago, it all clicked. These were people like me: We were weird, and we existed in this weird world. We were a family of outsiders."

Like any company, M.A.C. has a vision of itself. But unlike most, that vision is remarkably accurate. M.A.C. doesn't just claim to be all things to all people—"all ages, all races, all sexes" is the oft-repeated mantra—it actually is. Think of any other makeup line (we're not going to name names here, but you should feel free). Chances are, if you conjure up a certain cosmetic counter, you envision hipster teenagers in San Francisco. Or beautifully dressed women in Paris. Or maybe a preppy blonde with a single strand of pearls around her neck. But with M.A.C., you can't do it. The line isn't just a cult among a certain demographic; it has a following among *every* demographic.

Here's how it happened: In 1994, when every beauty and fashion company was clamoring to put single-name supermodels on their billboards, M.A.C. launched an ad campaign starring a black drag queen from Atlanta. Almost instantly, a few things happened: The brand, the makeup, and RuPaul were catapulted to worldwide fame. And M.A.C. very clearly established itself as an unconventional makeup line. *We won't look down on you, and we won't intimidate you, because we know what it was like to be picked on by the cool kids. And guess what? Now we're the cool kids.* To anyone who ever had an awkward moment in her (or his) life, the message resonated.

"It was by accident and by grand design at the same time," says John

Demsey, who was the president of M.A.C. from 1998 to 2005 and is now the group president of the Estée Lauder Companies, which owns M.A.C. "Being inclusive was always built into the DNA of the brand." When makeup artist Frank Toskan and hairstylist Frank Angelo founded M.A.C. in Toronto in 1984, their intent was to show that makeup was

It's dress-up. You might not buy the sparkly black lipstick or the glow-in-the-dark nail polish, but then again, you might.

So here's what you probably don't know: The products, the colors, the irreverence of M.A.C. are all overseen by one man. He's not famous. He's not even a makeup artist. And his philosophy is as unconventional



James Gager with models in M.A.C. makeup. From left: Dress by Dior. Top and skirt by Mugler. Dress by Rodarte. Swimsuit by Burberry Prorsum. Makeup: Brigitte Reiss-Andersen. Manicure: Tatyana Molot. Prop stylist: Viki Rutsch. Details, see Shopping Guide.

transformational, experimental, lighthearted—and that there was no judgment. And when the small indie brand was snatched up by Estée Lauder in 1998, the M.A.C. message—*Come over for a party! My parents are out of town!*—didn't change. It's just that the house got a lot bigger.

It's one thing to be invited to the party; it's another to keep going back for more. "M.A.C. brings out the child in all of us," says Espinet. "We tell the customers, 'Here's a bunch of color—go play.' I see grown women transform into giddy children. It's like giving a kid a box of crayons." For every woman (or man) who dressed up or played with her mother's makeup, M.A.C. feels familiar, almost nostalgic. Makeup is fun.

as the line he's in charge of: "I don't do pretty. I don't like pretty. And frankly, I find things that are pretty to be very boring." Meet James Gager. The senior vice president and creative director of M.A.C. since 1999, Gager looks the part: shaved head, alabaster skin, skinny black jeans, skinny black sweater, heavy black glasses. If you've seen a M.A.C. YouTube video or looked twice at an ad for Viva Glam as it passes by on a bus, you know Gager's work. Every written and visual aspect of the company—from the store windows to the wording on ads for the M.A.C. AIDS Fund—goes through Gager. If a picture or a design doesn't have his signature scrawled across it (along with a date), it's not going to happen.

Gager, who studied industrial design and got his master's in packaging at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, was born and raised in Niagara Falls, New York. Not exactly a hotbed of creativity. But when he was a kid, Gager would scour his parents' *New York Times* for fashion pictures and copy them. He would sketch interior-design ideas. He would make pastel renderings of the neighbors' houses (an industrious little guy, he used to sell the sketches to the residents: "I must have looked pretty forlorn—almost everyone bought the pictures"). When he was 11, Gager and his best friend went to a Halloween party at their school dressed as a pair of dice. "Obviously, I refused to buy a store-bought costume," he says. "I designed the most elaborate dice you've ever seen. But I forgot we had to get there. Of course, they didn't fit in the car, so the costumes had to go in the back of a truck. When we got to school, we couldn't even fit through the front door—we had to go in a special service entrance in back. But we won. With all that drama, how could we not win?"

If anyone was ever creative and eccentric enough to oversee M.A.C., it's Gager. Let's say your friend buys a red vinyl Wonder Woman lipstick holster. Granted, you might wonder why she would do such a thing, but you wouldn't wonder where she got it. Only one makeup company would ever make such an oddity. "I don't know where the ideas come from," says Gager. "They just come." (And not every one is a hit. "I did one line with [photographer] Cindy Sherman, and I loved it, but it didn't translate," he concedes.) "I want M.A.C. to be intelligent, and I want it to tell a story. I want to educate people. M.A.C. should never just be pretty."

Years after the dice evening, Gager's parents were out of town, and Gager, hardly a typical teenager, "felt like we needed to expand the space in my parents' living room. I used a cast-iron candelabra and took a wall down. It looked much better," he says. "I like to think that I'm still taking down walls."

How It Starts

You know what sees a lot of action? Gager's inspiration board. Every week, the creative director—or the people who work for him—pins advertisements, fashion photos, fabric swatches, you name it to an eight-foot-tall black board. The theme depends on what inspires Gager at that moment. And recently, what inspired him was cake.

"I liken the art of cake decorating to makeup artists embellishing a face," he says. "Plus, I love sweets." It takes about six months for an inspiration board to turn into eye shadows, blushes, and lipsticks in the store. On April 18, this collection of ephemera will become *Baking Beauties*, a limited-edition line that, yes, looks good enough to eat. —CATHERINE Q. O'NEILL



Collector's Items

M.A.C.'s special collections have sparked controversy, desire, and countless online bidding wars. Gager reveals the secrets behind six of the company's cult items.



▲ Gareth Pugh (2011)

"Gareth, a fashion designer, wears nail polish a lot, so that was an important part of his collection. You think of him as having this black palette, which is true, but he also experimented with shades of gray and iridescence."



◀ Gareth Pugh (2011)

"Gareth has a very geometric notion, so together we developed these lashes, which are very square. You'd think they'd look freaky on, but they actually look pretty great."

▼ Liberty of London (2010)

"We went to Liberty of London's archives of traditional prints. They actually took one of their prints and recolored it for us. We also developed a scarf. My assistant still wears hers."



Fafi (2008) ▶

"This French graffiti artist, Fafi, was doing some really charming illustrations. A lot of people didn't think it was going to do well. But it actually sold better than Barbie."



▲ Marilyn Monroe (2012)

"The allure of Marilyn never goes away. On the first day at one location, we had 600 people waiting outside, and online it sold out momentarily."



▲ Hello Kitty (2009)

"For this, we took the iconic character of Hello Kitty and made her M.A.C. for a moment. It had some naughty aspects to it—good kitty/bad kitty. It was really fun."

